



NURSERY TILES. NO. VII.—UNDER THE OLD APPLE TREE.

FIVE LITTLE PEPPERS; AND HOW THEY GREW.

BY MARGARET SIDNEY.

CHAPTER XVI.

GETTING A CHRISTMAS FOR THE LITTLE ONES.

AND so October came and went. The little Peppers were very lonely after Jasper had gone ; even Mrs. Pepper caught herself looking up one day when the wind blew the door open suddenly, half expecting to see the merry whole-souled boy and the faithful dog come scampering in.

But the letters came — and that was a comfort ; and it was fun to answer them. The first one spoke of Jasper's being under a private tutor, with his cousins ; then they were less frequent, and they knew he was studying hard. Full of anticipations of Christmas himself, he urged the little Peppers to try for one. And the life and spirit of the letter was so catching that Polly and Ben found their souls fired within them to try at least to get for the little ones a taste of Christmastide.

"Now, mammy," they said at last, one day in the latter part of October, when the crisp, fresh air filled their little healthy bodies with springing vitality that must bubble over and rush into something, "we don't want a Thanksgiving — truly we don't. But may we try for a Christmas — just a *little* one," they

added, timidly, "for the children?" Ben and Polly always called the three younger ones of the flock "the children."

To their utter surprise, Mrs. Pepper looked mildly assenting, and presently she said :

"Well, I don't see why you can't try ; 'won't do any harm, I'm sure."

You see Mrs. Pepper had received a letter from Jasper, which at present she didn't feel called upon to say anything about.

"Now," said Polly, drawing a long breath, as she and Ben stole away into a corner to "talk over" and lay plans, "what does it mean ?"

"Never mind," said Ben ; "as long as she's give us leave I don't care what it is."

"I neither," said Polly, with the delicious feeling as if the whole world were before them where to choose ; "it'll be just *gorgeous*, Ben !"

"What's that?" asked Ben, who was not as much given to long words as Polly, who dearly loved to be fine in language as well as other things.

"Oh, it's something Jappy said one day ; and I asked him, and he says it's fine, and lovely, and all that," answered Polly, delighted that she knew something she could really tell Ben.

"Then why not *say* fine?" commented Ben, prac-

tically, with a little upward sniff of his nose.

"Oh, I d'know, I'm sure," laughed Polly. "Let's think what'll we do for Christmas — how many weeks are there, anyway, Ben?" And she began to count on her fingers.

"That's no way," said Ben, "I'm going to get the Almanac."

So he went to the old clock where hanging up by its side was a "Farmer's Almanac."

"Now, we'll know," he said coming back to their corner. So with heads together they consulted and counted up till they found that eight weeks and three days remained in which to get ready.

"Mercy!" said Polly, "it's most a year, ain't it Ben?"

"Twon't be much time for us," said Ben, who thought of the many hours to be devoted to hard work that would run away with the time. "We'd better begin right away, Polly."

"Well, all right," said Polly, who could scarcely keep her fingers still, as she thought of the many things she should so love to do if she could. "But first, Ben, what let's do?"

"Would you rather hang up their stockings?" asked Ben, as if he had unlimited means at his disposal; "or have a tree?"

"Why," said Polly, with wide open eyes at the two magnificent ideas, "we hain't got anything to put *in* the stockings when we hang 'em, Ben."

"That's just it," said Ben. "Now, wouldn't it be better to have a tree, Polly? I can get that easy in the woods, you know."

"Well," interrupted Polly, eagerly, "we hain't got anything to hang on that, either, Ben. You know Jappy said folks hang all sorts of presents on the branches. So I don't see," she continued, impatiently, "as that's any good. We can't do anything, Ben Pepper, so there! there ain't nothin' to do anythin' with," and with a flounce Polly sat down on the old wooden stool, and folding her hands looked at Ben in a most despairing way.

"I know," said Ben, "we hain't got much."

"We hain't got *nothin'*," said Polly, still looking at him.

"Why, we've got a tree," replied Ben, hopefully.

"Well, what's a tree," retorted Polly, scornfully. "Anybody can go out and look at a tree out-doors."

"Well, now, I tell you, Polly," said Ben, sitting down on the floor beside her, and speaking very slowly and decisively, "we've got to do something

'cause we've begun; and we might make a tree real pretty."

"How?" asked Polly, ashamed of her ill-humor, but not in the least seeing how anything could be made of a tree. "How, Ben Pepper?"

"Well," said Ben, pleasantly, "we'd set it up in the corner —"

"Oh, no, not in the corner," cried Polly, whose spirits began to rise a little as she saw Ben so hopeful. "Put it in the middle of the room, *do!*!"

"I don't care where you put it," said Ben, smiling, happy that Polly's usual cheerful energy had returned, "but I thought — 'twill be a little one, you know, and I thought 'twould look better in the corner."

"What else?" asked Polly, eager to see how Ben would dress the tree.

"Well," said Ben, "you know the Henderson boys give me a lot of corn last week."

"I don't see as that helps much," said Polly, still incredulous. "Do you mean hang the cobs on the branches, Ben? That would be just awful!"



THE CONSPIRATORS.

"I should think likely," laughed Ben. "No, indeed, Polly Pepper! but if we should pop a lot, oh! a bushel, and then we should string 'em, we could wind it all in and out among the branches, and —"

"Why, wouldn't that be pretty?" cried Polly, "real pretty — and we can do that, I'm sure."

"Yes," continued Ben; "and then, don't you know, there's some little candle ends in that box in the Provision Room, maybe mammy'd give us them."

"I don't believe but she would," cried Polly; "'twould be just like Jappy's if she would! Let's

ask her now—this very own minute!"

And they scampered hurriedly to Mrs. Pepper, who to their extreme astonishment, after all, said "yes," and smiled encouragingly on the plan.

"Ain't mammy good?" said Polly, with loving gratitude, as they seated themselves again.

"Now we're all right," exclaimed Ben, "and I tell you we can make the tree look perfectly *splendid*, Polly Pepper!"

"And I'll tell you another thing, Ben," Polly said, "oh! something elegant! You must get ever so many hickory nuts; and you know those bits of bright paper I've got in the bureau drawer? Well, we can paste them on to the nuts and hang 'em on for the balls Jappy tells of."

"Polly," cried Ben, "it'll be such a tree as never was, won't it?"

"Yes; but dear me," cried Polly, springing up, "the children are coming! Wasn't it good, grandma wanted 'em to come over this afternoon, so's we could talk! Now *hush!*" as the door opened to admit the noisy little troop.

"If you think of any new plan," whispered Ben, behind his hand, while Mrs. Pepper engaged their attention, "you'll have to come out into the woodshed to talk after this."

"I know it," whispered Polly back again; "oh! we've got just heaps of things to think of, Bensie!"

Such a contriving and racking of brains as Polly and Ben set up after this! They would bob over at each other, and smile with significant gesture as a new idea would strike one of them, in the most mysterious way that, if observed, would drive the others almost wild. And then, frightened lest in some hilarious moment the secret should pop out, the two conspirators would betake themselves to the wood-shed as before agreed on. But Joel, finding this out, followed them one day—or, as Polly said, tagged—so that was no good.

"Let's go behind the wood-pile," she said to Ben, in desperation; "he can't hear there, if we whisper real soft."

"Yes, he will," said Ben, who knew Joel's hearing faculties much better. "We'll have to wait till they're a-bed."

So after that, when nightfall first began to make its appearance, Polly would hint mildly about bedtime.

"You hustle us so!" said Joel, after he had been sent off to bed for two or three nights unusually early.

"Oh, Joey, it's good for you to get to bed," said Polly, coaxingly; "it'll make you grow, you know, real fast."

"Well, I don't grow a-bed," grumbled Joel, who thought something was in the wind. "You and Ben are going to talk, I know, and wink your eyes, as soon as we're gone."

"Well, go along, Joe, that's a good boy," said Polly, laughing, "and you'll know some day."

"What'll you give me?" asked Joel, seeing a bargain, his foot on the lowest stair leading to the loft, "say, Polly?"

"Oh, I hain't got much to give," she said, cheerily; "but I'll tell you what, Joey—I'll tell you a story every day that you go to bed."

"Will you?" cried Joe, hopping back into the room. "Begin now, Polly, begin now!"

"Why, you haven't been to bed yet," said Polly, "so I can't till to-morrow."

"Yes, I have—you've made us go for three—no, I guess fourteen nights," said Joel, indignantly.

"Well, you were *made* to go," laughed Polly. "I said if you'd go good, you know; so run along, Joe, and I'll tell you a nice one to-morrow."

"It's got to be long," shouted Joel, when he saw he could get no more, making good time up to the loft.

To say that Polly, in the following days, was Master Joel's slave, was stating the case lightly. However, she thought by her story-telling she got off easily, as each evening saw the boys drag their unwilling feet to-bedward, and leave Ben and herself in peace to plan and work undisturbed. There they would sit by the little old table, around the one tallow candle, while Mrs. Pepper sewed away busily, looking up to smile or to give some bits of advice; keeping her own secret meanwhile, which made her blood leap fast, as the happy thoughts nestled in her heart of her little ones and their coming glee. And Polly made the loveliest of paper dolls for Phronsie out of the rest of the bits of bright paper; and Ben made windmills and whistles for the boys; and a funny little carved basket with a handle, for Phronsie, out of a hickory-nut shell; and a new pink calico dress for Seraphina peered out from the top drawer of the old bureau in the bed-room, whenever anyone opened it—for Mrs. Pepper kindly let the children lock up their treasures there as fast as completed.

"I'll make Seraphina a bonnet," said Mrs. Pepper, "for there's that old bonnet-string in the bag, you

know, Polly, that'll make it beautiful."

"Oh, do, mother," cried Polly, "she's been a-wantin' a new one awfully."

"And I'm a-goin' to knit some mittens for Joel and David," continued Mrs. Pepper; "'cause I can get the yarn cheap now. I saw some down at the store yesterday I could have at half price."

"I don't believe anybody'll have as good a Christmas as we shall," cried Polly, pasting on a bit of trimming to the gayest doll's dress; "no, not even Jappy."

An odd little smile played around Mrs. Pepper's mouth, but she said not a word, and so the fun and the work went on.

The tree was to be set up in the Provision Room; that was finally decided, as Mrs. Pepper showed the children how utterly useless it would be to try having it in the kitchen.

"I'll find the key, children," she said, "I think I know where 'tis, and then we can keep 'em out."

"Well, but it looks so," said Polly, demurring at the prospect.

"Oh, no, Polly," said her mother; "at any rate it's *clean*."

"Polly," said Ben, "we can put evergreen around, you know."

"So we can," said Polly, brightly; "oh, Ben, you do think of the *best* things; we couldn't have had *them* in the kitchen."

"And don't let's hang the presents on the tree," continued Ben; "let's have the children hang up their stockings; they want to, awfully—for I heard David tell Joel this morning before we got up—they thought I was asleep, but I warn't—that he did so wish they could, but, says he, 'Don't tell mammy, 'cause that'll make her feel bad.'

"The little dears!" said Mrs. Pepper, impulsively; "they shall have their stockings, too."

"And we'll make the tree pretty enough," said Polly, enthusiastically; "we shan't want the presents to hang on; we've got so many things. And then we'll have hickory nuts to eat; and p'raps mammy'll let us make some molasses candy the day before," she said, with a sly look at her mother.

"You may," said Mrs. Pepper, smiling.

"Oh, goody!" they both cried, hugging each other ecstatically.

"And we'll have a frolic in the Provision Room afterwards," finished Polly; "oh! ooh!"

And so the weeks flew by—one, two, three, four,

five, six, seven eight! till only the three days remained, and to think the fun that Polly and Ben had had already!

"It's better'n a Christmas," they told their mother, "to get ready for it!"

"It's too bad you can't hang up *your* stockings," said Mrs. Pepper, looking keenly at their flushed faces and bright eyes; "you've never hung 'em up."

"That ain't any matter, mamsie," they both said, cheerily; "it's a great deal better to have the children have a nice time—oh, won't it be elegant! p'raps we'll have ours next year!"

For two days before, the house was turned upside down for Joel to find the the biggest stocking he could; but on Polly telling him it must be his own, he stopped his search, and bringing down his well-worn one, hung it by the corner of the chimney to be ready.

"You put yours up the other side, Dave," he advised.

"There ain't any nail," cried David, investigating.

"I'll drive one," said Joel, so he ran out to the tool-house, as one corner of the woedshed was called, and brought in the hammer and one or two nails.

"Phronsie's a-goin' in the middle," he said, with a nail in his mouth.

"Yes, I'm a-goin' to hang up my stockin'," cried the child, hopping from one toe to the other.

"Run get it, Phronsie," said Joel, "and I'll hang it up for you."

"Why, it's two days before Christmas yet," said Polly, laughing; "how they'll look a-hangin' there so long."

"I don't care," said Joel, giving a last thump to the nail; "we're a-goin' to be ready. Oh, dear! I wish 'twas to-night!"

"Can't Seraphina hang up her stocking?" asked Phronsie, coming up to Polly's side; "and Baby, too?"

"Oh, let her have part of yours," said Polly, "that'll be best—Seraphina and Baby, and you have one stocking together."

"Oh, yes," cried Phronsie, easily pleased; "that'll be best."

So for the next two days, they were almost distracted; the youngest ones asking countless questions about Santa Claus, and how he possibly could get down the chimney, Joel running his head up as far as he dared, to see if it was big enough.

"I guess he can," he said, coming back in a sooty

state, looking very much excited and delighted.

"Will he be black like Joey?" asked Phronsie, pointing to his grimy face.

"No," said Polly; "he don't never get black."

"Why?" they all asked; and then, over and over they wanted the delightful mystery explained.

"We never'll get through this day," said Polly in despair, as the last one arrived. "I wish 'twas tonight, for we're all ready."

"Santy's coming! Santy's coming!" sang Phron-

mine! I know Dave'll get some of my things."

"Oh, no, Joe," said Mrs. Pepper, "Santa Claus is smart; he'll know your's is in the left-hand corner."

"Will he?" asked Joel, still a little fearful.

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Mrs. Pepper, confidently. "I never knew him to make a mistake."

"Now," said Ben, when they had all made a pretence of eating supper, for there was such an excitement prevailing that no one sat still long enough to eat much, "you must every one fly off to bed as quick as ever can be."

"Will Santa Claus come faster then?" asked Joel.

"Yes," said Ben, "just twice as fast."

"I'm a-goin' then," said Joel; "but I ain't agoin' to sleep, 'cause I mean to hear him come over the roof; then I'm goin' to get up, for I do so want a squint at the reindeer!"

"I am, too," cried Davie, excitedly. "Oh, do come, Joe!" and he began to mount the stairs.

"Good night," said Phronsie, going up to the centre of the chimney-piece, where the little red stocking dangled limpsily, "lift me up, Polly, do."

"What you want to do?" asked Polly, running and giving her a jump. "What you goin' to do, Phronsie?"

"I want to kiss it good night," said the child, with eyes big with anticipation and happiness, hugging the well-worn toe of the little old stocking affectionately. "I wish I had something to give Santa, Polly, I do!"

she cried, as she held her fast in her arms.

"Never mind, Pet," said Polly, nearly smothering her with kisses; "if you're a good girl, Phronsie, that pleases Santa the most of anything."

"Does it?" cried Phronsie, delighted beyond measure, as Polly carried her into the bedroom, "then I'll be good always, I will!"

CHAPTER VII.

CHRISTMAS BELLS!

In the middle of the night Polly woke up with a start.



"I'M GLAD MINE IS RED," SAID PHRONSIE.

sie, as the bright afternoon sunlight went down over the fresh, crisp snow, "for it's night now."

"Yes, Santa is coming!" sang Polly; and "Santa Claus is a-comin!" rang back and forth through the old kitchen, till it seemed as if the three little old stockings would hop down and join in the dance going on so merrily.

"I'm glad mine is red," said Phronsie, at last, stopping in the wild jig, and going up to see if it was all safe, "'cause then Santy'll know it's mine, won't he, Polly?"

"Yes, dear," cried Polly, catching her up. "Oh, Phronsie! you *are* going to have a Christmas!"

"Well, I wish," said Joel, "I had my name on

"What in the world!" said she, and she bobbed up her head and looked over at her mother, who was still peacefully sleeping, and was just going to lie down again when a second noise out in the kitchen made her pause and lean on her elbow to listen. At this moment she thought she heard a faint whisper, and springing out of bed she ran to Phronsie's crib—it was empty! As quick as a flash she sped out into the kitchen. There, in front of the chimney, were two figures. One was Joel, and the other, unmistakably, was Phronsie!

"What *are* you doin'?" gasped Polly, holding on to a chair.

The two little night-gowns turned round at this.

"Why, I thought it was morning," said Joel, "and I wanted my stocking. Oh!" as he felt the toe, which was generously stuffed, "give it to me, Polly Pepper, and I'll run right back to bed again!"

"Mercy!" said Polly; "and you, too, Phronsie! Why, it's the middle of the night! Did I ever!" and she had to pinch her mouth together tight to keep from bursting out into a loud laugh. "Oh, dear, I *shall* laugh! don't look so scared, Phronsie, there won't nothin' hurt you." For Phronsie who, on hearing Joel fumbling around the precious stockings, had been quite willing to hop out of bed and join him, had now, on Polly's saying the dire words "in the middle of the night," scuttled over to her protecting side like a frightened rabbit.

"It never'll be morning," said Joel taking up first one cold toe and then the other; "you *might* let us have 'em now, Polly, *do*!"

"No," said Polly sobering down; "you can't have yours till Davie wakes up, too. Scamper off to bed, Joey, dear, and forget all about 'em—and it'll be morning before you know it."

"Oh, I'd rather go to bed," said Phronsie, trying to tuck up her feet in the little flannel night-gown, which was rather short, "but I don't know the way back, Polly. Take me, Polly, *do*," and she put up her arms to be carried.

"Oh, *I* ain't a-goin' back alone, either," whimpered Joel, coming up to Polly, too.

"Why, you came down alone, didn't you?" whispered Polly, with a little giggle.

"Yes, but I thought 'twas morning," said Joel, his teeth chattering with something beside the cold.

"Well, you must think of the mornin' that's a-comin'," said Polly, cheerily. "I'll tell you—you wait till I put Phronsie into the crib, and then I'll

come back and go half way up the stairs with you."

"I won't never come down till it's mornin' again," said Joel, bouncing along the stairs, when Polly was ready to go with him, at a great rate.

"Better not," laughed Polly, softly. "Be careful and not wake Davie nor Ben."

"I'm *in*," announced Joel, in a loud whisper; and Polly could hear him snuggle down among the warm bedclothes. "Call us when 'tis mornin', Polly."

"Yes," said Polly, "I will; go to sleep."

Phronsie had forgotten stockings and everything else on Polly's return, and was fast asleep in the old crib. The result of it was that the children slept over, when morning did really come; and Polly had to keep her promise, and go to the foot of the stairs and call—

"MERRY CHRISTMAS! oh, Ben! and Joel! and Davie!"

"Oh!—oh!—oo-h!" and then the sounds that answered her, as with smothered whoops of expectation they one and all flew into their clothes!

Quick as a flash Joel and Davie were down and dancing around the chimney.

"Mammy! mammy!" screamed Phronsie, hugging her stocking, which Ben lifted her up to unhook from the big nail, "Santy did *come*, he *did*!" and then she spun around in the middle of the floor, not stopping to look in it.

"Well, open it, Phronsie," called Davie, deep in the exploring of his own; "oh! ain't that a splendid wind-mill, Joe?"

"Yes," said that individual, who, having found a big piece of molasses candy, was so engaged in enjoying a huge bite that, regardless alike of his other gifts or of the smearing his face was getting, he gave himself wholly up to its delights.

"Oh, Joey," cried Polly, laughingly, "molasses candy for breakfast!"

"That's *prime!*" cried Joel, swallowing the last morsel. "Now I'm going to see what's this—oh, Dave, see here! see here!" he cried in intense excitement, pulling out a nice little parcel which, unrolled, proved to be a bright pair of stout mittens. "See if you've got some—look quick!"

"Yes, I have," said David, picking up a parcel about as big. "No, that's molasses candy."

"Just the same as I had," said Joel; "do look for the mittens. P'raps Santa Claus thought you had some—oh, dear!"

"Here they are!" screamed Davie. "I *have* got

some, Joe, just exactly like yours! See, Joe!"

"Goody!" said Joel, immensely relieved; for now he could quite enjoy his to see a pair on Davie's hands, also. "Look at Phron," he cried, "she hain't got only half of her things out!"

To tell the truth, Phronsie was so bewildered by

her riches that she sat on the floor with the little red stocking in her lap, laughing and cooing to herself amid the few things she had drawn out. When she came to Seraphina's bonnet she was quite overcome. She turned it over and over, and smoothed out the little white feather that had once adorned one



THE PEPPER CHILDREN HAVE A CHRISTMAS AT LAST.

of Grandma Bascom's chickens, until the two boys with their stockings, and the others sitting around in a group on the floor watching them, laughed in glee to see her enjoyment.

"Oh, dear," said Joel, at last, shaking his stocking; "I've got all there is. I wish there was forty Christmases a-comin'!"

"I haven't!" screamed Davie; "there's something in the toe."

"It's an apple, I guess," said Joel; "turn it up Dave."

"Tain't an apple," exclaimed Davie, "'tain't round — it's long and thin; here 'tis." And he pulled out a splendid long whistle on which he blew a blast long and terrible, and Joel immediately following, all quiet was broken up, and the wildest hilarity reigned.

"I don't know as you'll want any breakfast," at

last said Mrs. Pepper, when she had got Phronsie a little sobered down.

"I do, I do!" cried Joel.

"Mercy! after your candy?" said Polly.

"That's all gone," said Joel, tooting around the table on his whistle. "What are we going to have for breakfast?"

"Same as ever," said his mother; "it can't be Christmas all the time."

"I wish 'twas," said little Davie; "forever and ever!"

"Forever an' ever," echoed little Phronsie, flying up, her cheeks like two pinks, and Seraphina in her arms with her bonnet on upside down.

"Dear, dear," said Polly, pinching Ben to keep still as they tumbled down the little rickety steps to the Provision Room, after breakfast. The children, content in their treasures, were holding high carnival in the kitchen. "Suppose they *should* find it out now—I declare I should feel most awfully. Isn't it *elegant?*" she asked, in a subdued whisper, going all around and around the tree, magnificent in its dress of bright red and yellow balls, white festoons, and little candle-ends all ready for lighting. "Oh, Ben, did you lock the door?"

"Yes," he said. "That's a mouse," he added, as a little rustling noise made Polly stop where she stood back of the tree and prick up her ears in great distress of mind. "'Tis elegant," he said, turning around in admiration, and taking in the tree which, as Polly said, was quite "gorgeous," and the evergreen branches twisted up on the beams and rafters, and all the other festive arrangements. "Even Jappy's ain't better, I don't believe!"

"I wish Jappy was here," said Polly with a small sigh.

"Well, he ain't," said Ben; "come, we must go back into the kitchen, or all the children will be out here. Look your last, Polly; 'twon't do to come again till it's time to light up."

"Mammy says she'd rather do the lighting up," said Polly.

"Had she?" said Ben, in surprise; "oh, I suppose she's afraid we'll set somethin' a-fire. Well, then, we shan't come in till we *have* it."

"I can't bear to go," said Polly, turning reluctantly away; "it's most beautiful—oh, Ben," and she faced him for the five-hundredth time with the question, "is your Santa Claus dress all safe?"

"Yes," said Ben, "I'll warrant they won't find that

in one hurry! Such a time as we've had to make it!"

"I know it," laughed Polly; "don't that cotton wool look just like bits of fur, Ben?"

"Yes," said Ben, "and when the flour's shook over me it'll be Santa himself."

"We've got to put back the hair into mamsie's cushion the first thing to-morrow," whispered Polly anxiously, "and we mustn't forget it, Bensie."

"I want to keep the wig awfully," said Ben. "You did make that just magnificent, Polly!"

"If you could see yourself," giggled Polly; "did you put it *in* the straw bed? and are you sure you pulled the ticking over it smooth?"

"Yes, *sir*," replied Ben, "sure's my name's Ben Pepper! if you'll only keep them from seeing me when I'm in it till we're ready—that's all I ask."

"Well," said Polly a little relieved, "but I hope Joe won't look."

"Come on! they're a-comin'!" whispered Ben; "quick!"

"Polly!" rang a voice dangerously near; so near that Polly, speeding over the stairs to intercept it, nearly fell on her nose.

"Where you been?" asked one.

"Let's have a concert," put in Ben; Polly was so out of breath that she *couldn't* speak. "Come, now, each take a whistle, and we'll march round and round and see which can make the biggest noise."

In the rattle and laughter which this procession made all mystery was forgotten, and the two conspirators began to breathe freer.

Five o'clock! The small ones of the Pepper flock, being pretty well tired out with noise and excitement, all gathered around Polly and Ben, and clamored for a story.

"Do, Polly, do," begged Joel. "It's Christmas, and 'twon't come again for a year."

"I can't," said Polly, in such a twitter that she could hardly stand still, and for the first time in her life refusing, "I can't think of a thing."

"I will then," said Ben; "we must do something," he whispered to Polly.

"Tell it good," said Joel, settling himself.

So for an hour the small tyrants kept their entertainers well employed.

"Ain't it growing awful dark?" said Davie, rousing himself at last, as Ben paused to take breath.

Polly pinched Ben.

"Mammy's a-goin' to let us know," he whispered

in reply. "We must keep on a little longer."

"Don't stop," said Joel, lifting his head where he sat on the floor. "What you whisperin' for, Polly?"

"I ain't," said Polly, glad to think she hadn't spoken.

"Well, do go on, Ben," said Joel, lying down again.

"Polly 'll have to finish it," said Ben; "I've got to go up-stairs now."

So Polly launched out into such an extravagant story that they all, per force, *had* to listen.

All this time Mrs. Pepper had been pretty busy in her way. And now she came into the kitchen and set down her candle on the table. "Children," she said. Everybody turned and looked at her—her tone was so strange; and when they saw her dark eyes shining with such a new light, little Davie skipped right out into the middle of the room. "What's the matter, mammy?"

"You may all come into the Provision Room," said she.

"What for?" shouted Joel, in amazement; while the others jumped to their feet, and stood staring.

Polly flew around like a general, arranging her forces. "Let's march there," said she; "Phronsie, you take hold of Davie's hand, and go first."

"I'm goin' first," announced Joel, squeezing up past Polly.

"No, you must n't, Joe," said Polly decidedly; "Phronsie and David are the youngest."

"They're *always* the youngest," said Joel, falling back with Polly to the rear.

"Forward! MARCH!" sang Polly. "Follow mam-sie!"

Down the stairs they went with military step, and into the Provision Room. And then, with one wild look, the little battalion broke ranks, and tumbling one over the other, in decidedly unmilitary style, presented a very queer appearance!

And Captain Polly was the queerest of all; for she just gave one gaze at the tree, and then sat right down on the floor, and said, "OH MY!"

Mrs. Pepper was flying around delightedly, and saying, "Please to come right in," and "How do you do?"

And before anybody knew it, there were the laughing faces of Mrs. Henderson and the Parson himself, Doctor Fisher and old Grandma Bascom; while the two Henderson boys, unwilling to be defrauded of any of the fun, were squeezing themselves in between everybody else, and coming up to Polly every

third minute, and saying, "There—ain't you surprised?"

"It's Fairyland!" cried little Davie, out of his wits with joy; "Oh! aint we in Fairyland, ma?"

The whole room was in one buzz of chatter and fun; and everybody beamed on everybody else; and nobody knew what they said, till Mrs. Pepper called, "Hush! Santa Claus is comin'!"

A rattle at the little old window made everybody look there, just as a great snow-white head popped up over the sill.

"Oh!" screamed Joel, "'tis Santy!"

"He's a-comin' in!" cried Davie in chorus, which sent Phronsie flying to Polly. In jumped a little old man, quite spry for his years; with a jolly, red face and a pack on his back, and flew into their midst, prepared to do his duty; but what should he do, instead of making his speech, "this jolly Old Saint"—but first fly up to Mrs. Pepper, and say—"Oh, mammy how did you do it?"

"It's Ben!" screamed Phronsie; but the little Old Saint didn't hear, for he and Polly took hold of hands, and pranced around that tree while everybody laughed till they cried to see them go!

And then it all came out!

"Order!" said Parson Henderson in his deepest tones; and then he put into Santa Claus' hands a letter, which he requested him to read. And the jolly Old Saint, although he was very old, didn't need any spectacles, but piped out in Ben's loudest tones:

"Dear Friends—A Merry Christmas to you all! And that you'll have a good time, and enjoy it all as much as I've enjoyed my good times at your house, is the wish of your friend,
JASPER ELIOT KING."

"Hurrah for Jappy!" cried Santa Claus, pulling his beard; and "Hurrah for Jasper!" went all around the room; and this ended in three good cheers—Phronsie coming in too late with her little crow—which was just as well, however!

"Do your duty now, Santa Claus!" commanded Dr. Fisher as master of ceremonies; and everything was as still as a mouse!

And the first thing she knew, a lovely brass cage, with a dear little bird with two astonished black eyes in it, was put into Polly's hands. The card on it said: "For Miss Polly Pepper, to give her music every day in the year."

"Mammy," said Polly; and then she did the queerest thing of the whole! she just burst into

tears! "I never thought I should have a bird for *my very own!*"

"Hulloa!" said Santa Claus, "I've got something myself!"

"Santa Claus' clothes are too old," laughed Dr. Fisher, holding up a stout, warm suit that a boy about as big as Ben would delight in.

And then that wonderful tree just rained down all manner of lovely fruit. Gifts came flying thick and fast, till the air seemed full, and each one was greeted with a shout of glee, as it was put into the hands of its owner. A shawl flew down on Mrs. Pepper's shoulders; and a work-basket tumbled on Polly's head; and tops and balls and fishing-poles, sent Joel and David into a corner with howls of delight!

But the climax was reached when a large wax doll in a very gay pink silk dress, was put into Phronsie's hands, and Dr. Fisher, stooping down, read in loud tones: "FOR PHRONSIE, FROM ONE WHO ENJOYED HER GINGERBREAD BOY."

After that, nobody had anything to say! Books jumped down unnoticed, and gay boxes of candy. Only Polly peeped into one of her books, and saw in Jappy's plain hand—"I hope we'll both read this next summer." And turning over to the title-page, she saw "A Complete Manual of Cookery."

"The best is to come," said Mrs. Henderson in her gentle way. When there was a lull in the gale, she took Polly's hand, and led her to a little stand of flowers in the corner concealed by a sheet—pinks and geraniums, heliotropes and roses, blooming away, and nodding their pretty heads at the happy sight—Polly had her flowers.

"Why didn't we know?" cried the children at last, when everybody was tying on their hoods, and getting their hats to leave the festive scene, "how could you keep it secret, mammy?"

"They all went to Mrs. Henderson's," said Mrs. Pepper; "Jasper wrote me, and asked where to send 'em, and Mrs. Henderson was so kind as to say that they might come there. And we brought 'em over last evening, when you was all abed. I couldn't a-done it," she said, bowing to the Parson and his wife, "if twan't for their kindness—never, no never!"

"And I'm sure," said the minister, looking around on the bright group, "if we can help along a bit of happiness like this, it is a blessed thing!"

And here Joel had the last word. "You said 'twarn't goin' to be Christmas always, mammy. I say," looking around on the overflow of treasures and the happy faces—"it'll be just *forever!*"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A LITTLE STORY-TELLER.

"**W**HAT do you think
Has happened to Rover?
The most dreadful thing
The whole world over—

If anybody else had told me so
I wouldn't have believed it — no, no, no!

Oh, dear — let me see —
I suppose I must tell —
You know our folks
Have got a big well;
It's dark and it's big, and, oh, such a place!
I've told him so to his very own face.

He's a bad, bad child;
He wouldn't mind;
He would go on the edge

As if he were blind;
And, oh! don't you think, he's tumbled way over,
And the water's all covered my poor little Rover!

What a jump, Uncle Bart —
Wait — you aren't to go —
When folks read big stories
They don't start up so
'Bout the ships getting lost, and folks struck down flat,
I knew my story'd be 'xcitin'r than that;

See, here comes Rover now!
See, he ain't dead!
Now, *can't* I make up things
Out of my head?
I guess if the editors knew what was smart
They'd take *my* stories 'nstead of yours, Uncle Bart.